

From the Express Initiatives page, Pune Newslite, the Indian Express, Wednesday, October 13, 2004

Pune Mayor's abuse of official car goes across the seven seas

The website freedominfo.org, a US-based international network of information access advocates, selected 25 news reports from all over the world to highlight the best use of Right To Information Act (RTI). Maj Gen SCN Jatar's (ret'd) question under the RTI, which revealed Pune's Mayor and her team's indulgence of official cars at the expense of the taxpayer's money, had created a stir. The Express report on his findings had been published in all editions of The Indian Express, which was then picked up by this website. An overview

Still in the hot spot

WHEN the Pune Mayor used her official cars for visits to pilgrim places and tourist spots, she could never have imagined this would hit the headlines in national newspapers. There was of course no question of her ever imagining that this would be cited internationally as a glaring example of abuse of power.

None can blame her if she was blissfully unaware of the emergence of the law on people's right to know and the enforcement of the Maharashtra Right to Information Act (MRTI), 2002.

Maj Gen SCN Jatar (ret'd) obtained information under the MRTI Act on the wayward trips of official cars kept at the disposal of the Mayor and other office bearers. We highlighted details of the abuse of power in these columns. A news item was carried by all editions of The Indian Express.

That was back in February this year. Jatar had asked for details of logbook entries of official cars from January to October 2003. The item was picked up by freedominfo.org, a US-based international network of information access advocates and posted on their website. The network in its website www.freedominfo.org has now highlighted Jatar's precision use of the law on Right to Know among 25 news stories on successful use of the law from all over the world on the occasion of the Second International Right to Know Day celebrated by activists on September 28.

Jatar's is the only instance from India cited by the network. In fact, it figures among the six cases highlighted in the teaser.

<http://www.freedominfo.org/survey/rtk2004.htm>

What the web site says

freedominfo.org update - September 28, 2004

Freedom of Information makes news around the world. New openness laws reveal corruption, human rights abuses, insider influence, privatization contracts, wiretap data and school performance.

- * Australian ex-prime ministers cost public \$500,000 a year each;
- * Romanians see how many wiretaps actually produce criminal convictions;
- * Canadian official paid \$27 per glass for orange juice;
- * Indian civil servants used government cars for religious pilgrimages;
- * Japanese liquor merchants spent 26 million yen on lobbying including gratuities to lawmakers;
- * Mexican FOI agency orders release of data used to expel Cuban diplomats.

Washington D.C., 28 September 2004 - Freedom of information laws now in more than 50 countries around the world made headlines over the past year on subjects ranging from public safety to corruption to human rights, according to the annual review of openness news posted today in celebration of International Right to Know Day by the virtual network of access advocates, freedominfo.org.

The freedominfo.org posting today included a sample of 25 news stories from around the world based on records released through the access laws:

- * Australians learned about the \$500,000 per year on average that each ex-prime minister of Australia costs taxpayers in that country for support of professional activities (excluding the lifelong pension each receives).
- * In Romania, citizens won access to data on wiretaps including how many actually led to criminal convictions.
- * Canadians discovered that the Premier of Alberta billed taxpayers for a \$2,600 lunch tab and \$27 glasses of orange juice.
- * An Indian citizen exposed the abuse of government cars by civil servants and officials who used the transport for tourist trips and religious pilgrimages.
- * The largest Japanese newspaper, The Yomiuri Shimbun, uncovered huge lobbying expenses by the Japanese liquor merchants association that won repeal of licensing requirements, including direct payments to lawmakers.
- * And the Mexican federal agency that is implementing Mexico's new law ordered release of Interior Ministry intelligence that was the basis for Mexico's expelling Cuban diplomats in 2003.

The posting today marks the second annual International Right to Know Day, established by the Freedom of Information Advocates Network (based in Budapest and Sofia, see <http://www.foiadvocates.net> and <http://www.righttoknowday.net>). Advocates in two dozen countries are mounting coordinated activities such as conferences, awards, release of studies, and workshops on September 28.

The freedominfo.org site is edited by a multinational volunteer editorial board, and is hosted and staffed by a George Washington University's National Security Archive (<http://www.nsarchive.org>), the leading non-profit user and advocate of the U.S. Freedom of Information Act.

Re-visiting the story

Pune's wake-up call: Use your right to know

Friday February 27 2004

PUNE: A story on the Pune mayor's alleged misuse of an official car would probably never make it to a national front page. But the story of a citizen exercising his Right to Information - despite the President okaying the Right to Information Act, most states have still not made it law - needs to be told because in Maharashtra this Act is exposing a string of lies and half-truths.

For the second time, Maj Gen (retd) S C N Jatar, who heads the Nagrik Chetna Manch in Pune, has invoked the Act to leave the city administration red in the face, exposing the misuse of official cars by elected representatives.

What he found was that not only were the cars taken outside city limits for personal use - not even paying the nominal sum they are supposed to - but on several days, mayor Dipti Chowdhury was recorded as being in two places at the same time. Favourite destinations: Tourist spots and pilgrim points.

As for the last item on Jatar's right to know list - an audit on the use of the vehicles-Pune Municipal Corporation's public information officer (PIO) finally confessed: No audit had ever been conducted.

Jatar checked out logbook entries of official cars allotted to mayor Chowdhury, deputy mayor Dilip Barate, PMC standing committee chairman Dilip Tupe, leader of opposition Ramesh Bagwe.

Quizzed on the indiscriminate use of the official car, Bagwe came up with a bewildering explanation: "I see myself as a worker of the downtrodden, my people feel proud to see me in an official car."

Mayor Chowdhury insisted she used her official car outside city limits, "only in an emergency, though I have used the car sometimes to visit religious places."

Asked how she could be at two places at the same time, Chowdhury said: "What can I do if corporators keep using my spare car?"

The PMC rulebook says that cars allotted to office-bearers can be taken outside municipal limits only with the mayor's permission and on payment of a nominal sum.

On October 21 last year, Jatar first asked the PMC for details of cars allotted to office-bearers: kilometres travelled every month in connection with official and private work, total expenditure, rules governing the use of these cars, and an audit report on the expenditure.

The response he got on November 10 was published in this website's newspaper on November 26. The total expenditure: Over Rs 51 lakh from January 1 to October 31, 2003.

Jatar became suspicious when the PIO dithered over the break-up of official and private use. Given the huge bill - elected representatives would have to travel close to 400 km per day within city limits to justify it - Jatar suspected that official cars were being taken on outstation trips regularly.

On January 19, he filed a fresh request under the Right to Information Act, seeking details of logbook entries on outstation trips made by the city's civic chiefs.

It all tumbled out: Official cars had been driven to Mahabaleshwar, Lonavla, Khandala, Shirampur, Nashik, Bhimashankar, Junnar, Pandharpur, Phaltan, Chiplun, Shirdi, Aurangabad, Pen, Wai, Rajgad, Mahad, Ganapati Pule, Akkalkot, Indapur, Tuljapur, Harihareshwar, Satara, Kolhapur Sangli, Ganagapur, Jejuri, Choufula, Solapur, Ahmednagar, Jalna, Dhule, Yavatmal, and even Nipani in Karnataka.

“Indiscriminate use of transport allotted for official duties is another example of how the PMC is like a personal fiefdom of the corporators,” says Jatar. But he's not giving up: The public has a right to know and in Maharashtra, there's a law in place.

Jatar had sought the information of the use of official cars by the office-bearers of Pune Municipal Corporation from January 1 to September 30, 2003. By the time he received the information, October was over and the Public Information Officer of the civic body generously including information till October 31. Jatar now is getting ready to demand similar information for the corresponding period this year.

He had sought information in the meantime only for one month and the outcome was revealing. No longer did the office-bearers seem to be taking the official cars designated to them to places of pilgrimage and tourist resorts. Or at least the logbook did not mention any such outstation visits.

Yet, there did not appear to be any significant drop in the total mileage logged by the cars though outstation trips are fewer. Perhaps the office-bearers have suddenly turned hyper-active and have begun spending most of the day on wheels moving from one place to another within the city.

http://cities.expressindia.com/archivefullstory.php?newsid=104076&creation_date=2004-10-20